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Work Opportunities and Frictions

for Rural Child Migrants in West African Cities

Introduction

This chapter looks at the participation of rural children and youth in the urban labour market and, specifically, focuses on the first years of their migration. The young migrants' standing as workers is inscribed in a context of enduring economic crisis since the 1980s, which along with the impact of structural adjustment programmes have had pervasive consequences for African economies. Most people, irrespective of their economic status, increase their earnings by stretching income-generation across several informal activities and sometimes also combining formal employment with informal economic activities (Calvès and Schoumaker 2004; Meagher 2005). Employees in the public service or in private enterprises may thus invest part of their income in small informal businesses such as telephone centres, internet cafés and small restaurants and put their wives or close relatives in charge of the daily running of the businesses (Kanté 2002).

While activities in the informal realm of the economy are usually labelled as self-employment and small-scale businesses dependent on unpaid family labour, the increasing intertwining of finances deriving from formal employment and informal endeavours has led to stratification among the actors operating in the informal arena. As a result, new forms of employment have emerged outside the formal structures of a regulated labour market. According to Roy and Wheeler (2006:454) more than 80 per cent of all enterprises in West Africa in the early

2000s operated informally and they provided jobs for around 50 per cent of all workers. In Burkina Faso, the proportion of the working population employed informally was 74.3 per cent in 2001 (INSD 2008). Nevertheless, few studies have focused specifically on employment practices in the informal labour market. The increasing informalisation of African economies casts doubts as to whether we can speak of employment relations as really being waged work based uniquely on capitalist market relations. Concretely, people are put to work because of their position within the household, the network of kin, or their social relations, and not because of their skills, which they potentially could sell in the labour market. Moreover, most employment relationships are part of low level patronage systems and they are based on thick social relations, which people seek to extend and consolidate even more (Chauveau 1998; Lachaud 1994:49-51;Whitehead, pers.com.). Frequently, employment is ambiguously defined because employers seek to cast doubt on the existence of an employment relationship and on the respective terms of reference for the employer and the employees (Chen 2004).

In research with children and youth, this is a particularly important issue to scrutinise, since they are more likely to be categorised as family labour by their employers and subsequently appear as unpaid workers in labour statistics. Despite their visibility in the streets and in small informal businesses, children and youth working in the urban informal economy are not fully considered economic and social agents, hence their efforts to change the situation in which they live are often overlooked. Accepting that they are active agents begs two sets of questions. On the one hand, economic difficulties and stark competition encourage employers to choose low qualified but cheaper labour (Kanté 2002; Morice 1987) and employees to accept unfavourable conditions; the adverse economic climate may lead to a downward spiral of exploitative practices. Without trivialising exploitation, it is imperative to explore what young people are willing to put up with and why. On the other hand, the lack of attention to the work of children and youth in small urban enterprises leaves out the beneficial aspects for teen-aged children of learning to labour, of learning practical skills that often are not available in their village, and of learning social skills, which are key to negotiating the terms of work.

The 'informal sector' is sometimes mentioned in connection with the worst forms of child labour[1], but apart from the studies on *kayayei* - young female head-porters - in Ghana (Agarwal et al. 1997; Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008; Kwankye et al. 2009) and young vendors in markets in Senegal (Bass 1996), little research has focused on children and young people involved in this sector. An emerging body of literature focuses on self-employed youth engaging in the urban economy (Buchbinder 2012, Langevang 2008, Langevang and Gough 2009), but not on the time these youth might have spent in employment. Based on extended biographies of fifteen child migrants and 125 semi-structured interviews with migrants who were in the age group 14–24 years at the time of the interview, their parents in *Pays Bisa* in south-eastern Burkina Faso (the region from which the young migrants originate), and established migrants in Ouagadougou and Abidjan,[2] this chapter examines the broad range of activities in which rural child and youth migrants engage, and the reasons behind their tactical choices as urban workers. The chapter addresses both diversities and similarities in children's and youth's experiences, and the transformation individuals undergo as they gain more knowledge about urban ways and the labour market.

Initiation into urban work

The way in which rural children and youth enter the urban labour market and the implication this has on their security has received little attention, save in connection with trafficking where traffickers or intermediaries are assumed to place the child with an employer. This criminalisation of their entry into work fits poorly with the West African context where family and friends are key sources of information and instrumental for being introduced appropriately to potential employers (Chant and Jones 2005; Hart 1973; Lachaud 1994). None of the independent child and youth migrants participating in my research were trafficked. Most of them were in their mid or late teens when they first migrated, and despite the fact that they were independent in the sense of not travelling with their birth parents, they rarely travelled on their own. In 2005, almost half of the adolescent, predominantly male migrants[3] interviewed in Ouagadougou had migrated with friends and brothers of a similar age, while the rest went with older kin, of whom some were closely related and others just belonged to the

same lineage or village. Their entry into urban work depended on their travel companions, and also on their age, gender and on local concepts of age- and gender-appropriate work.

Travelling with other juniors implied setting off with either an age-mate who also had no urban experience or going with someone who had worked in the city for a few years. The former was often the case, when younger boys left without their parents' knowledge. It did not mean however that they were left to their own devices once they were in the city. Distant relatives or members of the same ethnic group put them up temporarily while they searched for work by going from door to door. Entering the informal labour market in this manner emphasised the wage labour relation that the young migrants wished for – or perhaps rather the wage itself than an employment relationship, because they generally were happy to sleep in their employer's household and saw it as a positive quality when they were treated like a marginal household member.

When they first arrived, the youngest of the children coming to Ouagadougou usually became itinerant vendors of sachets of iced water and local juices or dishwashers in food stalls at the road-side and tiny cafés. In the literature on the informal economy, street vending is usually perceived as adults' self-employment or micro-enterprises, possibly drawing on the labour of their own children. However, in towns and cities in Burkina Faso it is common for women to employ boys and girls to sell their home-fabricated juices or snacks from trays carried on the head or from ice boxes on a small cart. In 2005, the children worked on a contractual basis where they earned a 20 per cent commission of their actual sale or a fixed wage of 3,000 CFA francs (US$ 6.25, one-tenth of the formal minimum wage) per month. Even if they had not sold drinks before, most had done some petty-trade at the rural markets near their village or had, at least, bought drinks from itinerant vendors frequenting these markets, so they had some idea about the necessary demeanour for a vendor. However, they were not always used to handling money quickly and in other languages than Bisa, so one of the commonest errors made by new vendors was getting the change wrong. Vending cold drinks was a hot-season occupation, once the rains began and temperatures cooled down, the trade rapidly declined and many women switched off their freezers because the profit no longer covered

the electricity bill or the children earned so little that they began to look for other jobs.

Older and physically stronger boys found work delivering water from communal water taps to households by pushing small carts with a water drum. Although they earned two to three times more than the little street vendors did, they did not make it their line of business by buying a water drum but remained employees or shifted to different types of jobs. They considered the delivery of water a low-status job, one they could do when other jobs failed and one that had no prospects for advancement. Moreover, an important part of the remuneration was sleeping and eating some meals at the employer's household, if they became independent by buying their own water drum, they would need to work harder to have sufficient money for rent and food and still be able to save up.

Others found employment as kitchen hands in food kiosks and small restaurants or were introduced by friends or family to the owner. Although boys occasionally help their mother, it is mostly girls who are charged with domestic tasks in rural households. Boys were not employed for their skills and usually began learning as dishwashers and then worked their way up. Many remained with hard physical work where they could use their knowledge of driving a donkey and chart and became brick-makers on the periphery of construction sites. In contrast with vending cold drinks, these jobs were not seasonal but of a longer duration and they had possibilities of advancement. In the small restaurants, children and youth eventually became waiters with a prospect to look for work in better restaurants and in bars, and brick-making was often a gateway to learning masonry.

Rural children and youth who have come to the city to work cannot afford being idle. Not only do they need money for food and accommodation, earning money is also the principal motivation behind their migration. Finally, they are obliged to work even if they live with kin in order not to be labelled as lazy and sent home (Chauveau 1998). In Ouagadougou, not everyone found employment immediately or had money to buy food for several weeks before beginning work. Instead, the young Bisa migrants began to shine shoes, their predominant tide-over occupation before finding employment and between jobs. Although they maintained shoe-shining did not require any skills, few of them had had leather

shoes themselves. The practical skill of washing, polishing and shining a pair of shoes was quickly learned from the slightly older shoe-shiners, who had an even more important role in teaching their younger siblings and friends in which neighbourhoods they could expect to find most customers, how to approach them with the deference required in customer-dealings, especially while awaiting the standard payment of 50 CFA francs (US$ 0.10) per pair of shoes. They also introduced their younger brothers to urban life in general and, perhaps most importantly, encouraged them to enquire about employment in small food kiosks, restaurants, and bars. It was rare to see itinerant shoe-shiners in their twenties; generally the young Bisa succeeded in finding employment, or entered into itinerant trade, or migrated to other destinations.

Travelling with junior migrants is linked with circular migration and the fact that many young people return to help their family farm if their labour is needed or to attend important ceremonies such as funerals and weddings. When these young 'early career' migrants travel to the city again, they are often accompanied by younger 'brothers', who can be biological siblings, half-siblings, cousins or friends of a similar age. These relationships are relatively equal as the older migrants cannot easily find employment for the younger ones or create work for them in their own business because they are in precarious economic circumstances themselves (Thorsen 2009). Instead, they initiate the younger ones to the same type activities in the informal economy and inculcate similar strategies for maximising their incomes.

For children and youth, travelling with senior migrants usually implied that they would work as family labour for their travel companion or that the senior would take charge of finding work for them. Young migrants coming to Ouagadougou or Abidjan with senior migrants often worked in their food kiosks, in small shops, or on brick-making sites. Prior to migration, both children and youth claimed that they did not mind what work they would be asked to do, the primary objective was to become a migrant. None of the interviewees complained about the work they had been asked to do but, as we shall see below, disagreements over the status of the relationship, and thus of the need for remuneration, sometimes created tensions.

Analogous practices operate in Ghana when rural children and youth migrate from the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions to Accra or Kumasi. In

the mid-2000s, the vast majority of girls worked as head-porters -*kayayei*- in and around the big markets, whereas boys had a slightly wider range of possibilities. In Accra, almost half of the boys interviewed by Kwankye et al. (2007) worked as technicians or mechanics and one quarter as street vendors or petty traders, while in Kumasi close to half the boys worked as 'truck pushers' (porters moving goods on small carts) and the other half engaged in street vending and trade. The initiation to urban work for these young people also took place through friends and relatives, and the low entry costs in these types of work were of key importance to enable them to set up as marginal actors in the informal economy (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2007). Similar to the young migrants seeking employment spontaneously, shoe-shiners, *kayayei* and 'truck pushers' made certain that they would earn some money rather than being unpaid family labour.

Initiation through social relations tends to create occupational niches: in Ouagadougou, almost all the itinerant shoe-shiners are Bisa and in Accra and Kumasi, most of the *kayayei* are Dagomba and Mamprusi. In spite of social regulation, the sheer number of young people engaging in a niche occupation means that they out-compete themselves by saturating the market for their services and risk eroding their earning capacity, as is common across the informal economy (Chauveau 1998). Nevertheless, there is a lack of employment opportunities, and it is important to learn the right behaviour with clients, and to know the invisible boundaries between permissible and off-limit places so as not to get into trouble with police and watchmen. These requirements reinforce the mechanism of newcomers entering the same niche activities as their friends and relatives.

Occupational repertoire

In the global South, most children are employed in the informal labour market, where regulatory labour laws are rarely observed (Bourdillon 2006:155).One of the obstacles to finding a good job mentioned by young rural migrants in Ouagadougou is their low level or lack of formal education. Yet, the current structure of the labour market does not privilege primary education; statistics show the difference in job opportunities is insignificant between those who complete primary education and those without any formal education. According

to the living standards survey in Burkina Faso in 2003, more than 97 per cent find employment in a private business or start their own micro-business. This means an investment in education will only have an economic impact, if secondary education is completed and even then, in 2003, 67.9 per cent of women and 69.3 per cent of men were employed in a private business or started their own (Bourdet et al. 2006).

Exploring the issue with the young Bisa migrants revealed that their perception of a good job stopped short of formal employment; their experience was of being turned down for informal jobs in restaurants and shops where literacy or numeracy was a prerequisite. Their job repertoire in Ouagadougou was restricted to itinerant work on the streets (thirty of forty-nine young migrants) and to working in various types of food places (fifteen of forty-nine).But it did not mean they remained with the same employer or even in the same line of work. Some of those who came with age-mates and found work themselves did not escape senior relatives' views on what they should ideally do.

The older brother of Yacou, a 14-year-old newcomer to Ouagadougou, for example, did not think street vending was a good job for the boy and promised to find better paid work for Yacou and his travel companion, Seni. He also invited the boys to share a house with him and his friends instead of living in their employer’s compound; he thus drew them away from the sphere in which they could be positioned as unpaid family labour by employers using the language of kinship, and more closely into the rurally-connected family sphere. The brother mediated a job as a fishmonger for Seni, who was slightly older, while Yacou was put to shine shoes temporarily because his brother did not manage to find an employer who would take on a young boy not used to work. Yacou took action himself though and found a job as dishwasher in a woman’s road-side food stall.

Another migrant persuaded a friend of his to employ his younger brother, Boureima, as a brick-maker although he was only 14 years old and quite skinny. Until then Boureima had sold cold drinks in the streets in another neighbourhood, first for his mother’s sister and then on a contractual basis for employers he found himself. Boureima complied with his older brother’s wish for him to work in brick-making. Due to his slight stature, his employer gave him the lightest task of driving the donkey cart and did the heaviest tasks of loading sand, mixing cement and fabricating bricks himself. Nevertheless, the boy left

the employment after two months only, not because of the work load (he began to work with another brick-maker), but because of his first employer's attempts to correct him and thus restrict his autonomy.

Even when rural children and youth do not work for a relative, they quickly learn that local concepts of age- and gender-appropriate work shape relatives' view on the type of work they should mediate for young newcomers and also employers' willingness to take them on .Wide-spread agreement of what constitutes appropriate work for children in particular age groups protects to a certain extent the youngest ones from very hard physical work, but it also keeps them in occupational positions requiring no particular skills and yielding low incomes. The youngest migrants thus experience social exclusion from more economic arenas than do older youth, who are better at navigating the urban context because of their life skills and often also their longer migration experience.

Gender also influences the kind of work, in which young migrants engage. Most child domestic workers, for example, are rural girls who are brought to the city by a female relative or who travel with sisters of a similar age and get help from long-term female migrants to find a placement (Castle and Diarra 2003; Dottridge 2004; Jacquemin 2002, 2004; Lambert 2007; Terre des Hommes 2003).The Ghanaian studies mentioned above suggest that unskilled girls' repertoire of occupations was narrower than boys', in as much as they primarily became *kayayei*, though, in Kumasi, girls also worked in trade, street vending, and as technicians (Kwankye et al. 2009). Hashim's (2007) study of independent child migrants from the Upper East to rural and urban destinations around Kumasi offers more details about the diversity of skilled occupations at which young migrants aimed, if they were not in formal education. She found that girls aspired to training in tailoring, tie-and-dye, hairdressing, and catering, while boys trained in mechanics and carpentry. A study of child relocation in Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali adds sewing, embroidering, weaving, and knitting to girls' training, and welding, fishing, tailoring and becoming truck drivers to boys' repertoires (Riisøen et al. 2004). The vocational training typical for boys and young men had an employment potential, whereas that for girls and young women, in for example knitting and embroidering, was more likely to help them

to diversify their sources of income from petty-trading than to find employment or for business potential in the sense of employing others.

It is rare to see girls train in typically male occupations such as mechanics and carpentry but boys may enter some of the occupations dominated by girls. Domestic work is one of them, but although they find such work very attractive boys and young men doing laundry, ironing, and cleaning are frequently overlooked in literature on child protection and on youth employment. Yaya, a 24-year-old migrant in Abidjan, explained why he would have liked to work as a domestic.

> When I came from Burkina, I'd never imagined that I would do the work that I do at the moment [brick-making]. I thought I would get a job that wouldn't make me tired and, well, that I wouldn't be under the scorching sun all day, perhaps working in the house of someone and not getting too exhausted!

Domestic work ranks high in status, positioned between manual work requiring physical stamina and indoors white-collar work. For those with some education, domestic work in elite families and customer service in various businesses are attractive for exactly this reason.

The importance of social relations and patronage in a context of limited provision of social security by the state and of a highly informalised labour market compels young migrants to accept their relatives' mediation of employment and technical training, whether they aspire to do that kind of work or not. The difficulties of finding employment imply they seize on any opportunity, at least for a while. By doing so, they adhere to their social position as juniors and show respect for the person mediating employment; but they also take advantage of the fact that several relatives may want to mediate employment, that they are part of different social networks, and that these relatives' views on what kind of work is appropriate may diverge slightly. They might be put to work due to their position in the network of kin but, as both Yacou and Boureima prove, they also take matters into own hands when they are not satisfied with the employment or working conditions their relatives have negotiated. Hence, the work trajectories of children and youth are not solely an

outcome of being unpaid family or being put to work by relatives, but also of their own initiatives to find employment.

Negotiating the terms of labour

Despite the focus in child protection advocacy on exploitation and the worst forms of child labour in the global south, children's agency in negotiating working conditions and pay in informal employment has not been explored to any extent. Focusing on a mixed group of young migrants and non-migrants, Guichaoua (2006) examines what kind of contractual forms they entered in the early 2000s when working in construction sites and small garment industries in Abidjan. He observes that employment by a parent, mediation by a parent, mediation by a friend, and spontaneous applications were equally important channels through which youth found work. What is particularly interesting in Guichaoua's study is the link between the access to employment and its remuneration or lack of it. His analysis shows that on average, paid workers in construction sites – and thus the employees who managed to exert their rights to pay – were young men in their mid-twenties, while apprentices and unpaid workers in the garment industry were young women and men just under twenty years of age[4]. Despite the fact that all employees, including those in construction, continued to use kinship ties to acquire employment, Guichaoua (2006:15) points out that the dynamics changed. This is, he argues, partly because parental authority over children slackens once the children grow older, and partly because the children over time build up their own social networks through which they seek work. The argument is based on the assumption that parents are able to exert stronger claims on the labour of children living in their household than are strangers who employ the children. But it raises the question of the age at which children are able disengage themselves from claims on their labour within the household. Guichaoua suggests it happens in the early twenties, though not as a linear process but as a response to vulnerabilities and opportunities. Other studies show that children may travel to look for work inside or outside the network of kin earlier (Chant and Jones 2005; de Lange 2007; Erulkar et al. 2006; Hashim 2005)

When adolescent boys from the Bisa region in Burkina Faso did not travel with age mates they sought to persuade close kin to take them along or they

befriended distantly related migrants and exposed their wish to find waged work. Established migrants with small businesses in which the young people could work often recruited workers in this way. The individual relationships that the young people had, and developed at the destination, with relatives and employers and with other members of the households where they lived shaped both seniors' ability to make claims on their unpaid labour, and the willingness of the young people to carry out such work. 19-year-old Paul described how he had befriended Karim, a relatively young established migrant, and noted that his migration came about through this friendship. Karim, on the other hand, explained that, despite the fact that he already had employed another boy, he had accepted to let Paul work with him since Paul was his mother's sister's son. However, the arrangement created tensions. The employment relationship was ambiguous, and Karim and Paul interpreted its implications differently. While Karim focused on Paul's labour input and found him lazy compared to another boy he had employed, Paul expected to work in the same manner as he was used to in the village, with small breaks whenever he felt tired. Yet, he also expected to be paid for his work. The common wage in 2005 for donkey drivers and sand miners was 5-6,000 CFA francs (US$ 10.50-12.50) per month, yet young workers recruited through kinship were rarely paid a monthly wage. Some of the young migrants patiently waited to see what the future had in store for them, but Paul did not have such patience. He did not know that Karim had bought a plot of land for him in the neighbourhood and felt cheated because he only received 500-1,000 CFA francs (US$ 1-2) per month in pocket money, so one day he packed his rucksack to return to the village. Karim got angry but still did not tell him about the plot of land, instead he bought Paul some new clothes and gave him a lump sum to bring back to the village.

These tensions of working for relatives and of expecting some sort of employment relationship are rooted in differing perceptions of time, in trust and notions of respect, and in ambiguous practices of leaving much unsaid. Where relatives who provide employment justify their remuneration at the end of the young migrant's stay with them by referring to savings and investments in the future, as Karim did when making known to us his purchase of land for Paul, they retain both immediate control over the young migrant's means and the option to withdraw or reduce the intended remuneration. Not all young people

agree to this, partly because they wish to have some autonomy in spending their money and take advantage of the possibilities in the city, partly because they are afraid of being cheated of their money.

How wages and working conditions are agreed when an employment relationship is initiated is also an under-researched theme. When intermediaries are involved, they are usually the ones to negotiate with the employer; but when children and youth find work themselves by going from door to door, they are the ones to decide how much to ask for and whether what is being offered is adequate. Children may not yet have developed skills to negotiate well and they have little on which they can fall back (Kielland and Tovo 2006), especially if they have arrived in the city without sufficient means.

Ernest was not in a desperate situation when he came to Ouagadougou aged fourteen since he was staying with an older brother and did not need to pay rent. However, his brother was not in a position to help him find work and he searched for most of three months before finding a job as dishwasher in a small road-side restaurant. He accepted a low wage of 2,500 CFA francs (US$ 5.25) per month because, as he said, he knew nothing then and thought it was a lot of money. Two weeks later he quit because he was not given sufficient food. He began to shine shoes until he found another dish-washer job paying 4,000 CFA francs (US$ 8.40), which he held for a couple of months, then quit because he was not paid his wage. Once again he was shining shoes until he found a job as a domestic worker, where he was paid 6,000 CFA francs (US$ 12.50) per month. He worked in this job for more than a year, then finally quit because his workload grew heavier but his employer did not want to increase his wage. Although Ernest points to the economic improvement of each job, he had other motivations for changing jobs: not having enough to eat, being cheated of his wage, and having to shoulder too heavy a workload. In a context where much is left unsaid and young people show respect for their seniors by not challenging them, the negotiation of working conditions is necessarily very subtle and may indeed take the form of changing jobs.

Even when the terms of labour seem to be agreed upon, ambiguities may arise if the relationship deteriorates or better opportunities emerge. In Abidjan, Amadou, a 23-year-old migrant from *Pays Bisa*, explained that he had come to Abidjan with an older brother in 2000 when he was fifteen. He had come to look

for money but worked in his brother's shop in the beginning. "I wasn't paid for this work because he is my brother. Once I was to return to the village, he was going to pay my bus ticket plus an additional sum." However, the shop had little business and as his brother spent most of the money drinking, the prospect of receiving anything for his work shrank. In the end, the young migrant went to another part of Abidjan and began physically much harder work in hand-irrigated vegetable farming. "Here I work with another brother, we have the same father but different mothers; the first brother, the shopkeeper, comes from our village but we are not of the same family." Amadou did not reject working within the network of relatives and only rejected the working relationship with his distant brother once the chances of receiving a lump sum and a ticket home faded away and once he was strong enough to do the gardening. Young Bisa migrants accepted being remunerated at the end of the stay when working in the shop or food kiosk of a family member, whereas they expected to be treated as wage labour for physically challenging work like gardening or brick-making.

A widespread discontent, that also made young migrants look for new jobs, was related to vulnerabilities regarding wages and the condescending ways in which they were addressed. Many had experienced a delay before being paid their wage because their employer coaxed them into continuing to work by reasoning that he did not have money right now because someone was lacking behind with a payment to him or because business had slowed down momentarily but that the employer intended to pay as soon as he received money. 22-year-old Ibrahim was cheated several times. The first time, he worked for a distant classificatory brother in Ouagadougou, who promised to put aside his wages to help him save up money; but when Ibrahim wanted to leave after eleven months, his relative staged an argument to avoid paying him. The second time an employer fell behind with paying his wage, Ibrahim worried and discreetly began to look for another job. When he was paid for two months' work with a 10,000-CFA-franc-note (US$ 21) effectively cutting down his wage from 6,000 CFA francs (US$ 11) to 5,000 CFA francs (US$ 13) per month, he stepped up his search. Lucien had had a similar experience when he worked on a barbeque outside a bar. At first, his employer paid him 500 CFA francs (US$ 1) per day then gradually decreased the wage until Lucien walked out, because the

300 CFA francs (US$ 0.63) he was offered barely covered his expenses for food and thus left him penniless at the end of the day.

For hard-working youth it is quite a blow to get less money than expected or not to be paid at all. Being cheated once teaches them to be more cautious and to lessen their patience waiting for payments. An important thing to learn when navigating the labour market is the balance of trusting an employer and of gauging the right moment to quit a job to minimise losses. Children do not always discover the deception immediately because they leave some or all the wage with their employer to save, whereas youth often prefer to keep their money themselves. In spite of labour market legislation and the creation of institutions that should secure the rights of children and youth, it is difficult for them to claim their workers' rights: they have no contracts and more often than not, they have accepted working for wages much lower than the minimum wage, but receiving also food and often accommodation. Older relatives may put pressure on employers to pay their arrears, sometimes threatening to go to the police, but the youth themselves point out that it is not worthwhile to take such cases to the police.

"With our tiny wages the costs would surpass our claim," explained a group of youth taking a break from itinerant street work in Ouagadougou. "Not only would we have to pay stamps and slip a few extra notes into the file for the police to open a case, we'd also spend several days coming to the police station, days where we could make money. It's just not worth it! Besides the boss might know someone at the police station and he'll turn the complaint around and say that we've stolen. Of course the policeman will believe his friend and not a poor youth from a village."

Conclusion: adaptation and learning

Rural children and youth's navigation of the urban informal labour market begins even before they come to the city and is spurred by their expectations of what they can achieve as migrants and curbed by their ability to convince older migrants to take them along. Before the first migration, they know little about what is in store for them. They are very confident that they will cope and be successful, not because they do not hear about hardship and see migrants return as poor as when they left but because they aim to imitate those who do

well (Thorsen 2007). Their lack of concern regarding having the skills needed to find work is rooted in the importance of social relations in the labour market, the informal ways of learning through doing the work, and seeing that peers returning home for visits have earned money for clothing, small gifts and, sometimes, a bicycle. Navigation beginning at home focuses first and foremost on becoming migrants but has implications for the type of occupation teen-aged children enter and for their wage and prospects for future advancement. Who they travel with shapes their starting point in the city.

Two important points emerge from children and youth's accounts of their working experiences in Ouagadougou and Abidjan. First, migration does not constitute a break with the family but rather incorporation into the larger network of kin, and second, despite teen-aged migrants' vulnerability to being exploited they gradually achieve upward social mobility. The way in which the urban informal labour market is structured encourages these processes. In his study of street-working children in Guatemala City, Offit focuses on child employees and children providing services such as shoe-shining and transporting goods and argues that children need to navigate a series of systematic contradictions. They get caught between adults who condemn their work and a socio-economic structure that encourages their work, between being perceived as less competent and malleable and cheap due to their tender age, and, finally, between the perception among employers that they assist a poor child and a denial of considering the entire range of hardship the child may experience (Offit 208:122).

Rural children and youth in Ouagadougou and Abidjan are caught in similar contradictions. Concern among the urban middle-class over the exodus of rural children is intertwined with the idea that idleness leads to delinquency and, in Côte d'Ivoire in the 2000s, also with xenophobia against migrants from neighbouring countries. The political environment in both places has adverse impact on young migrants' opportunities to find decent work or to engage in remunerative self-employment. Not only does this environment offer scope for processes of exclusion through vilifying street-working children as petty thieves and allowing police to fine children and young people working as itinerant traders and confiscate their goods, it also adopts a *laissez-faire* attitude to

protecting the rights of working children and fails to provide viable alternatives for rural children and youth.

Another set of contradictions is inherent in widely accepted local norms surrounding age-appropriate work which offer some protection of the youngest migrants against harmful work but, at the same time, assign them to do low-status and low-paid jobs or to work in conditions depicted as family relations. They are thus positioned as junior kin, who should be fed, clothed, housed and cared for as part of a long-term intergenerational contract and but are given a gift for their work and a bus ticket when returning home to the village. Yet, teen-aged children negotiate such contradictions. Firstly, when migrating with peers they avoid automatically becoming family labour but still benefit from the protection older and more experienced peers can offer in terms of shelter and learning to navigate the urban world in ways that facilitate earning money, a certain level of well-being and becoming acquainted with the opportunities available for poor young people.

Secondly, the difference in interpretations of relationships when teen-aged children migrate with relatives shows that kinship ties are negotiated and that children take an active role in shaping them. Underneath the distinctions made by young migrants between close and distant relatives is Bourdieu's notion of practical kinship which is tied to the utilisation of connections (Bourdieu 1977: 34) or, in this case, to children distancing themselves from ineffective relations who hinder them in accumulating economic and symbolic wealth through migration. Kin relationships may thus be invoked or rejected strategically by individuals pursuing their own goals (Schrauwers 1999). The issue of age also plays out in this arena, as established migrants are more likely to interpret the relationship with the youngest migrants as one of junior-senior family relations and with migrants in their late teens and early twenties as one of employment. So, although migration can be a strategy for teen-aged children to begin disengaging themselves from direct claims on their labour within the rural household, their success in gaining more autonomy depends on their ability to negotiate their position vis-à-vis relatives in the city and alternative ways of finding employment and housing in the specific context. In Ouagadougou younger migrants have a larger degree of autonomy than they would have in Abidjan because they can leave a relative's household to find employment by

walking from door to door or engage in itinerant services, yet the low wage levels and frequent occurrence of non-payment often make them return to the fold but invoking relationships with different members of the kin group.

Finally, young migrants have to go along with relatives' ideas of what work will give them the best prospects for advancement not to disrespect them, even if their relatives do not consider children's preferences and agency to make decisions. They are not seen as competent social actors but as someone who should be put to work to learn the correct ways of being a migrant. Again, this is an arena of negotiation; children and youth have their own ideas of advancement and they navigate contrasting views among their relatives by seeking the assistance of those favouring what they would like to do.

The second point emerging from young migrants' accounts of their experiences in Ouagadougou and Abidjan is that their initial vulnerability to exploitation teaches them necessary tactics and strategies to bypass some of the obstacles. Although they are used to work on the farm and do some trading in the rural markets, they have had a fair amount of liberty, which is restrained significantly when entering paid employment or having to have enough money to eat by the end of the day. It is a steep learning curve, and within a very short time of their arrival the young migrants become acutely aware of their marginalised position in the urban space. That the beginning is difficult, especially for the younger and more immature migrants, is reflected in their mobility within the labour market. They have difficulties putting up with being spoken to in condescending ways just because they are young and their poverty is inscribed in their clothing, demeanour and low level of formal education. They frequently quit a job for this reason but, as only few of them return home, they are obliged to adapt. At the same time, their experiences teach them to work hard, to endure hardship and plan for unforeseen events and to control themselves and act respectfully towards seniors even if they are treated unfairly.

The young migrants learn practical urban skills, as well as social skills, informally through a trajectory of jobs which either allow them to build up expertise in one line of work, e.g. moving up from dishwasher, to kitchen hand, to waiter or cook, or enhance their future ability to diversify their incomes by having worked in many different jobs. Alternatively, they move to labour markets with higher wages and quasi-formal employment like in Côte d'Ivoire.

The informalisation of African economies is characterised by income diversification. While rural children and youth are familiar with a number of sources of income based on farming, traditional artisan skills and trade in rural markets, it is difficult for them to diversify their activities in the early years of their migration, simply because they lack resources beyond covering the most basic needs. Instead, they engage in an occupational bricolage where they learn a diverse range of skills superficially by shifting between job-categories and imitating flourishing independent activities. Rather than being a strategy of refining their skills within one profession, occupational bricolage aims to increase their ability to take advantage of any job opening and income-earning possibility and gradually build a portfolio of activities that increase their economic and social standing.

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[1] The ILO Convention No. 182 aims to protect children and youth below the age of 18 years from exploitation and harmful work, notwithstanding a lower minimum age for admission into paid employment for work considered as safe.

[2] Multi-sited fieldwork was carried out for this project during twelve months over a period of four years from 2005-2008. The author is grateful to the many families took part in the research and facilitated contact with their relatives in the different localities. Additionally, is grateful for research funding from the Development Research Centre on

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[3] Very few girls migrated independently to Ouagadougou from this region in 2005 but they had begun migrating to rural towns in the region either to work as daytime domestics returning home at night or to sell cold drinks and snacks in the market during the dry season.

[4] 76 per cent of the apprentices were young women, as were 36 per cent of the unpaid workers.